



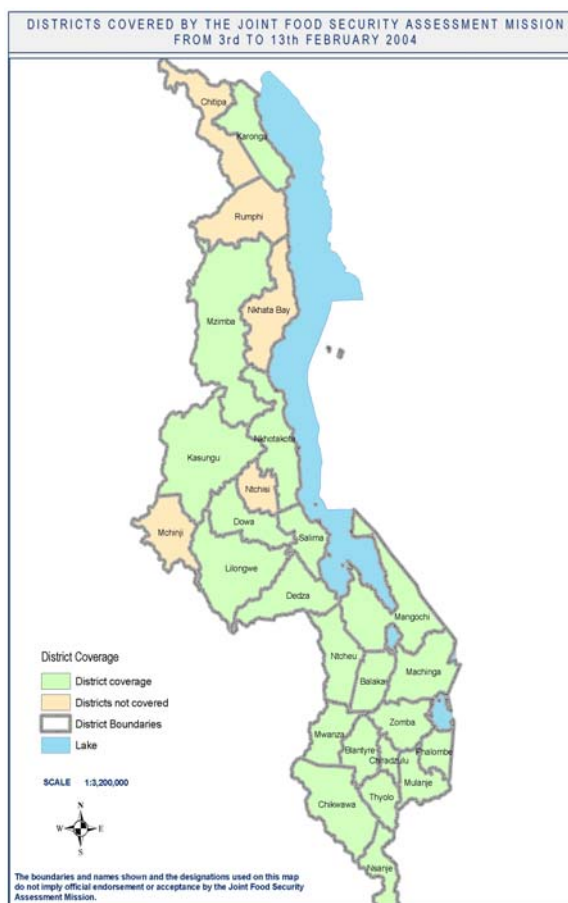
REPORT OF THE JOINT WFP/FEWSNET/USAID/Save the Children UK/Government RAPID FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT MISSION – 3RD TO 14TH FEBRUARY 2003

1.0 Introduction

The late onset of the rains and its erratic pattern has raised concern among farmers and other stakeholders of food security, about crop production prospects this season. The situation has reportedly been very critical in the southern region, where the rains started very late. In order to address these concerns, it was decided to conduct a rapid assessment to determine what the likely impact of this development on crop development was, and if possible, to identify possible trouble (hot) spots. A multi-sectoral team was formed comprising staff from FEWSNet, Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Food Security (MoAIFS), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), Save the Children (UK), USAID, and the Department of Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (DoPDMA) to conduct the exercise. The team visited all the 13 districts in the southern region due to the severity of the problem in the area, 7 out of the 9 districts were visited in the central region while only 2 out of the 6 districts, Karonga and Mzimba, were visited in the northern region. In total the team visited 22 districts out of 27 districts as shown in the map below.

The districts are subdivided into Extension Planning Areas (EPAs) in the MoAIFS setup. These are further subdivided into sections to facilitate delivery of agricultural extension messages. The high variability of the rainfall pattern this season across time and space makes it imperative for the discussion in this paper to cover all these levels of administration.

Households have different capacities to cope with crop failure, with the poor households being the most vulnerable. The paper will therefore also examine how the households will probably cope depending on the livelihood zone in which they are found. The livelihood zones represent areas where households have similar options for obtaining food. Some of the districts fall in more than one zone. Mangochi district for instance, falls under two livelihood zones. The upland (Namwera area) falls under the Shire Highlands while the lowland (including areas around Lake Malawi) falls under the Southern Lakeshore livelihood zone.



The team conducted interviews with Ministry of Agriculture officials at ADD, RDP and EPA levels, District Health Officials, ADMARC staff, WFP field staff, maize traders and some of the people who had come to the market to buy maize, and local farmers.

2.0 Factors Affecting Production

Factors that will affect this year's crop production include rainfall, input uptake and pests. Rainfall has been the most crucial because it has posed a big threat to crop production and it actually prompted this rapid assessment.

2.1 Rainfall

The start of the rainfall season delayed by two to four weeks in all the districts visited. The rains generally started between mid-November to early December as opposed to mid October to early November when rains normally start in most parts of the southern region. Most parts of the region did not have pre-season rains. The rains in the northern region and parts of the central region started around the same time, mid-November, but with more intensity than in the southern region. Normally rains start from the south and progress towards the Northern region, hence this years' trend presented an early start of rains in the northern region and caught most of the farmers there unawares.

The rains experienced in the southern region during the first half of the season were generally very light and erratic, with poor distribution both in time and space. Although the amount of the rainfall was very low across the southern region, the majority of the farmers still planted (around end of November to early December) after realizing that time was running out. However, this was followed by three to four weeks' dry spells that resulted in wilting of the crops and in some areas complete drying up. This was more pronounced in the lower shire districts of Nsanje and Chikwawa where farmers lost up to the third or fourth planted crop due to the prolonged dry spells. With the exception of the lower shire and isolated pockets throughout the southern region districts, some of the crops planted with the first rains survived on residual moisture and some isolated showers that occurred during the period. The rains resumed during the third week of January, which, in the case of the southern region, marked the start of the real planting rains as the intensity and distribution of the rains significantly improved. The crops that survived the dry spell were boosted by the increased amounts of rain although it was evident in some areas that damage had already been done as evidenced by stunted growth of some maize. Although the rainfall distribution has not been very good over time, it has been adequate to support crop development, but not enough to recharge the ground water table. This could affect the area available for winter cropping.

The low amounts of the rains, have on the positive side, reduced or prevented leaching of the soil making some of the crops look very healthier (green) than they would otherwise be, especially in areas where leaching is a big problem, such as lakeshore areas of Mangochi, Nkhonkhotakota, and Salima districts where soils are sandy. The breaks in the rainfall have also allowed ample time for farmers to weed.

2.2 Input Availability and Uptake

Inputs such as fertilizer and seed were readily available, mainly due to the Government Targeted Inputs Programme (TIP) that provided these inputs for free to some smallholder farm families; Farmers' World, Malawi Rural Finance Company and other commercial inputs suppliers. Distribution of treadle pumps for irrigation also continued to expand though the low rainfall amounts may affect the availability of water for irrigation in some areas. In addition, some NGOs have also been providing farm inputs to selected farmers in some parts of the country like Phalombe, Dowa, Mulanje, Nkhonkhotakota, and Chiradzulu. Some companies who are interested in cotton buying this year have also been giving farmers some farm inputs including chemical pesticides and fertilisers in districts like Chikwawa and Balaka.

In general, despite the improved availability of inputs, the uptake has been low as compared to the previous season. Some of the reasons for the reduction in input uptake include: the reduction in the number of beneficiaries for TIP to 1.7 million from 3.5 million beneficiaries last season, increase in the prices of fertilizer, and reduced number of NGOs providing inputs to poor households as compared to last season.

3.0 Crop Production Prospects and Vulnerability

Although the rainfall situation has improved in most parts of the country since the third dekad of January, there are areas where the crop is very young and may not do well if the rains do not extend beyond end March to mid April. During the assessment period some farmers had just re-planted and/or were still planting, especially in the southern part of Thyolo, southern part of Phalombe, the northern part of Chiradzulu and the entire lower shire area. The dry spells had also been more serious in some parts than others across districts, EPAs and even within an EPA. The areas that were identified to have been seriously affected by the late onset of the rains and/or dry spells are shown in Table 1 below. At the time of the visit some areas had been experiencing a one week dry spell at the critical time for maize, and there were fears that if the dry spells continued for another week or so they could have adverse effects on production.

Table 1: AREAS AFFECTED BY LATE ONSET OF RAINS AND DRY SPELLS

DISTRICT	EPAs affected	DISTRICT	EPAs affected
Karonga	Lupembe	Phalombe	Mpinda
		Phalombe	Kasongo
Balaka	Utale	Phalombe	Tamani
Balaka	Rivirivi		
Balaka	Phalula	Mulanje	Milonde
		Mulanje	Mulanje Boma
Machinga	Ntubwi	Mulanje	Msikawanjala
Machinga	Nampeya		
Machinga	Nanyumbu	Chiradzulu	Mombezi
Zomba	Chingale	Thyolo	Thekelani
Zomba	Mpokwa	Thyolo	Masambanjati
Zomba	Msondole	Thyolo	Dwale
Mangochi	Mbwadzulu	Chikwawa	Kalambo
Mangochi	Nasenga	Chikwawa	Mbewe
Mangochi	Maiwa	Chikwawa	Mitole
		Chikwawa	Livuzi
Nsanje	Makhanga	Chikwawa	Mikalango
Nsanje	Magoti	Chikwawa	Dolo
Nsanje	Mpatsa		
Nsanje	Zunde	Blantyre	Kunthembe
Nsanje	Nyachilenda	Blantyre	Lirangwe
Mwanza	Thambani	Neno	Neno
Mwanza	Mwanza	Neno	Lisungwi
		Dedza	Lobi
Ntcheu	Manjawira	Dedza	Mayani
Ntcheu	Kandeu	Dedza	Kaphuka

DISTRICT	EPAs affected	DISTRICT	EPAs affected
Ntcheu	Nsipe		
Ntcheu	Bilira	Lilongwe	Mpingu
Ntcheu	Sharpevale		

In Mangochi district, farmers in the upland areas (Namwera area) planted earlier (end November) than in the lowland areas (end December, three to four weeks later than normally expected). However, after one to two weeks, there was almost two-week dry spell that caused wilting of crops in the lowland areas and prevented some farmers from planting. These farmers planted later when the rains resumed in January. The areas that were worst hit by late onset of planting rains and dry spells include Mbwadzulu EPA and parts of Nasenga and Maiwa EPAs along the lake. A lot of the maize crop in these areas was still very young. After the rains resumed, they have generally been heavy and well distributed and most of the crops have recovered and are doing well. Since some of the households in these affected areas depend on fishing as a source of income, this may help reduce the severity of the situation assuming that maize is readily available on the market at reasonable prices.

In Zomba, the crop development was generally good except in some parts of Chingale, Mpokwa and Nsondole EPAs. These areas were affected by both late onset of rains and dry spells and are probably the worst hit in Zomba district. The crops in these areas were still young at about 30cm high while in most parts of the district maize was tasselling. These are the areas that would adversely be affected if the rains stopped early. In Nsondole and Mpokwa EPAs, the main problem has been the dry spells that have occurred when the maize was at tasselling and milky stage. If the situation does not improve, yield will be drastically affected. However, most of these areas are around lake Chilwa where some of the households depend on fishing to obtain cash to buy food, mainly maize. In addition, some of the households grow rice in the wetlands around the lake, which they can consume or sale to obtain cash to buy maize. This leaves the area in Chingale EPA to be the most vulnerable in the district.

In both Nsanje and Chikwawa the rainfall pattern this season is categorized as abnormal in all EPAs as it started very late, in scattered areas and was erratic. Although some few areas in Makhanga EPA received some rains in early December, real effective planting rains in the two districts did not come until end January compared to normal- mid November. Most farmers who planted in early December lost the crop and had to plant as many as five times in some cases. As late as the first week of February, some farmers were still planting maize. The crop stand ranged from emergency to 30cm high and in poor condition. Normally the crop should have been at flowering stage. Some of the sorghum that survived the dry spell was flowering at less than a meter high and yields are expected to drop significantly. There were also reported cases of army worm outbreaks in all EPAs in both Nsanje and Chikwawa which was also a threat to the young growing crops. Cotton production too is expected to drop due to the late planting as well as due to the shortage of seed as those who planted early lost the crop and it was difficult to obtain seed for replanting. Performance of crops in the lower shire this season is contingent upon continuation of good rains up to end March/early April, which is quite unusual for the lower Shire. Normally rains stop by early to mid March. Water levels in Shire were still high, raising fears that the window for winter crop production may yet again be affected for a second year. The inability of households to produce winter crops for a second year could seriously affect the food security status of many of households who depend on winter production for their food.

In Machinga district, the season started mid November in Traditional Authority Mlomba in Nsanama EPA and Traditional Authorities Chamba and Mposa in Domasi. The rains were followed by two weeks dry spell until the second week of January when widespread rains began. The worst hit areas are Ntubwi, Nampeya and Nanyumbu EPAs. Ntubwi EPA is probably the most vulnerable in terms of lack of alternative options for obtaining food.

Serious planting rains in Balaka RDP were received in mid-January as opposed the first week of December last season. The worst hit areas in the district include parts of Utale, Rivirivi and Phalula EPAs. In some parts of Utale EPA (especially Shirenorth sections), some of the farmers had just planted and the maize was at vegetative stage. Although cotton, a predominant cash crop in Balaka district, is expected to increase in production, there are still a lot of households that do not grow the crop. Cotton production is expected to increase due to increased support by companies that are trying to buy the crop this year. This includes provision of seed, chemicals and promise of better prices than in the past. The crop is doing well as it is drought tolerant. The farmers who grow this crop may use the income generated from the sale of the crop to buy maize. However, it remains to be seen whether these companies will honour their promise as experience has shown that farmers have usually been let down as companies offer lower prices than what was previously agreed during the growing period. Cotton prices have generally been low and this has affected production of the crop in recent years.

In Phalombe and Mulanje, the two districts received early rains in mid-November followed by planting rains end-November. The districts experienced dry spells from early December to mid-January when the rains started to come in good amounts for crop development. During the period of the assessment, crop development was at planting to tasselling stage and the majority had planted in both districts. Major crops like maize and tobacco were at different stages within the districts because of the delays in the onset of planting rains, dry spells and erratic rainfall pattern. Both maize and tobacco were stunted and, according to agricultural officials, the production of these crops will be reduced as compared to last season. The other crop which has been affected, mainly in Phalombe district, is rice, due to lack of adequate rainfall for transplanting from the nurseries to the main field. The EPAs which have been affected in the two districts, include Mpinda, Kasongo, and Tamani in Phalombe and Milonde, Mulanje Boma, and Msikawanjala in Mulanje.

In Thyolo the first planting rains came in mid-December but did not cover the whole district. Normally the first planting rains are expected to come early November. From mid-December to mid-January the district experienced a dry spell of 4 weeks, which resulted in poor germination of crops and no replanting was possible due to dry soils. Most people replanted after receiving rains again in mid-January. Maize crop is at different stages and the maize which is tasselling is mostly stunted. The EPAs, which have been affected in the district, include Thekelani, Masambanjati, and Dwale. Besides the current rainfall pattern, these areas also lie in the rain shadow, and have poor soils and steep slopes.

In Mwanza and Neno, planting rains came in early December and about 60% of arable land was planted, but this was followed by a long dry spell. Real effective planting rains came back in mid January. Distribution was not uniform- in Neno north, for example, the season can be described as normal while the west is regarded as disastrous- crop stand at less than 30 cm. Normally, planting rains come mid November and end late March to early April. Overall rains were delayed by almost six weeks and the impact of this is poor crop stand across the two districts. Other factors affecting crop production this year include low uptake of fertilizer - the two districts are said to have had no fertilizer in all ADMARC markets.

Chiradzulu, like other districts, received planting rains early December when the majority planted, but the rains have been erratic and some areas, like Mombezi EPA, have experienced long dry spells. However, if the rainfall is consistent with no dry spells, agricultural officials are expecting higher yields in maize as compared to last season in all the EPAs in the district except for Mombezi According to Ministry of Agriculture officials at RDP, the production of tobacco will be reduced because of the dry spells experienced in the RDP.

Blantyre received effective planting rains late November, followed by a continuous dry spell until early to mid January when the reliable rains resumed. The dry spells resulted in wilting, stunted growth and forced maturity. The resumption of rains in mid January prompted farmers to replant. Kunthembwe EPA and part of Lirangwe, which also traditionally experience poor rainfall distribution, are the most affected areas. On average the maize crop ranges from vegetative to flowering stage. It is only in Ntonda EPA where the season can be described as normal; people may start eating green maize by end February. Overall, crop production is estimated to drop this year, mainly due to the dry spells.

Ntcheu, Dedza and Lilongwe received first planting rains from mid November (Nsipe and Tsangano EPAs) to mid December for the rest of the areas. In Ntcheu the first rains were followed by a dry spell lasting up to three weeks in some areas, whereas in Dedza the first rains were well distributed without any serious dry spells. In Lilongwe dry spells following the first rains in Mid December affected further planting and delayed fertilizer application. Following the resumption of rains in mid January, farmers finished off planting. There is variation in the stages of crop growth as a result of the staggered planting due to the long break in the rains. The dry spell experienced at the time of the assessment in all the districts was a cause for concern since the crop was at the critical flowering stage, and if it were to continue into the third dekad of February, it could have serious consequences on yields. Manjawira EPA in Ntcheu was one area worst affected by the dry spells. Mpingu EPA in Lilongwe was seriously affected by the late start to the season so much so that the majority of the farmers in the EPA planted in mid January and the crop is still young, requiring good rainfall. If rains stop early in Lilongwe, this EPA could be seriously affected. Without the effects of this potentially harmful mid-season dry spell, production prospects in both districts were quite good. It remains to be seen how the rest of the season performs with respect to rainfall.

Nkhotakota, Salima, and Dowa districts received first planting rains end November. Despite experiencing erratic rains and dry spells from mid-December to mid-January the crop production prospects for maize are good and if the rains continue to fall up to end-March the yields will be higher. The only major crops, which have been affected, are rice (in Salima and Nkhotakota) and tobacco. For both rice and tobacco, there was delayed transplanting from the nursery to the main field. Normally for a well-fertilized burley tobacco, a farmer can pick 30 to 35 leaves per stem, but this season agricultural officers in Dowa are estimating 10 to 15 leaves per stem because of stunting.

In the northern region, Karonga district was the only one identified to have serious problems with the rains. The most affected area is the central part of the district covering Lupembe EPA. This area has been hard hit by dry spells and maize is wilting and, if the rains do not resume quickly, production will be adversely affected. However, some of the households in the area depend on fishing. The area also has a lot of livestock (cattle and goats), which households can sell to obtain food.

In Kasungu, the situation was relatively good although production may not reach last year's level. Although the crop in the northern part of the district was relatively young, the situation was described as almost normal.

Based on the above discussion and a review of the livelihood profiles, the team attempted to subjectively list the affected EPAs, which are likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity as shown in table 2. In addition to this list, potentially all EPAs in Nsanje and Chikwawa could be at risk if the rains do not go beyond end March. This list is quite preliminary and a detailed analysis will have to be conducted later as the crop matures in order to determine the magnitude of the likely food insecurity problem and the areas affected. The rainfall pattern continues to be unpredictable and the number of the vulnerable EPAs may change any time depending on rainfall performance for the remainder of the season.

Table 2: VULNERABLE EPAs

No.	EPA	No.	EPA	No.	EPA	No.	EPA
1	Ntubwi	8	Nasenga	15	Thekerani	22	Mombezi
2	Utale	9	Maiwa	16	Mpinda	23	Manjawira
3	Rivirivi	10	Nampeya	17	Kasongo	24	Kunthembwe
4	Phalula	11	Nanyumbu	18	Tamani	25	Mpingu
5	Lupembe	12	Mpokwa	19	Milonde	26	Thambani
6	Chingale	13	Nsondole	20	Mulanje Boma	27	Lisungwi
7	Mbwadzulu	14	Masambanjati	21	Msikawanjala	28	All EPAs in Nsanje & Chikwawa

3.0 Agricultural Activities and Crop Development

The nature and pattern of the rainfall this season has resulted in the crops being at a wide range of development stages within and across areas. Maize, for instance, ranges from vegetative to tasselling stages in the southern region. The maize that was planted in November with the light rains is now tasselling while that which was planted in January is at vegetative to 30cm high. In the northern region and parts of the central region, the maize is in the middle development stage i.e. 50cm – 60 cm high. For those who planted early, the maize is tasselling. This means there will also be a delay in the maturity of the crops, especially maize, with harvesting being delayed by as much as one month.

Agricultural activities range widely from weeding, fertilizer application to banking in the case of maize, land preparation and transplanting in case of rice, and reaping of tobacco.

4.0 Current Food Security Situation

In general, using the agricultural statistics compiled fortnightly at RDP level, the food security situation is better this season in most areas visited as compared to the same time last season. This is mainly due to a number of factors, which include reduced sales of maize from the previous harvest, increase in winter production (partly attributed to increased uptake of treadle pumps as well as households desire to improve their food production in winter), application of manure, food aid distribution during 2002/03 season, which helped in reducing the consumption of maize while in the field, and agriculture and food security interventions by various NGOs.

Despite the poor performance of the season, the food security situation at present looks good. The only concern is that due to the delayed start of the season, the hungry season will last a bit longer than is usually the case. This, in some areas, particularly in the lower Shire, where crop maturity will be delayed, premature harvesting could take place. This is likely to happen in those areas where the people have been eating water lilies (Mpatso EPA) since August as a result of a poor harvest last year coupled with inability to produce a winter crop due to high water levels in the Shire river.

Below is a table showing the comparison of percentages of farm families without food against the total number of farm families in some RDPs as of 31st January 2004.

However, the trend is showing that the percentages of farm families are now increasing due to prolonged hunger season. Normally it is expected to increase until the current crop begins to mature, which this year will be in March instead of mid to end February because of the late onset of the rains. The poor households normally begin to run out of food around September/October or three to four months after harvest. After the food runs out, the households mainly depend on maize purchases and working for food. In extreme cases, these depend on gifts or handouts, mainly by government and NGOs. Sources of income, availability of maize on the market and prices are therefore important in ensuring food security of these households during this period.

Table 3: Percentage Farm Families Without Food From Own Production as of 31st Jan., 2004

District/RDP	% of farm families without food during 2003/04 season	% of farm families without food during 2002/03 season
Phalombe	45	50
Mulanje	68	64
Thyolo	75	84
Chiradzulu	64	90
Nkhotakota	7	36
Salima	30	64
Dowa	25	47
Nsanje	63	64
Chikwawa	49	56
Blantyre	54	80
Mwanza	63	58
Neno	64	65
Ntcheu	48	62
Dedza	48	63
Lilongwe	38	80

Note: These statistics are based on food stocks, mainly maize, from the previous harvest, and does not include the contribution of other food crops like income from cash crops and other coping strategies

4.1 Maize Availability and Prices in the Markets

At this time of the season, most of the poor households depend on the market for food. These markets are either local or ADMARC. The demand in these markets has risen substantially due to the erratic supply of maize in ADMARC markets and increase in the number of households running out of food from own production. In addition, the quality of maize in the local markets is generally better than in the ADMARC markets, forcing some of the households to still buy from them despite the high price compared to the ADMARC price.

4.1.1 Local Markets

Table 4. LOCAL MARKET MAIZE PRICES

MARKET	MEASURING UNIT	WEIGHT/UNIT (KGs)	PRICE/UNIT	PRICE/KG
Mangochi	Pail	18	MK300	MK16.67
Mangochi	Bucket	4	MK100	MK25.00
Mangochi	Small plate	0.26	MK5	MK19.23
Ntaja	Small plate	0.37	MK8	MK21.62
Karonga	Pail	18	MK300	MK16.67
Mzimba	Pail	18	MK200	MK11.11
Kasungu	Pail	18	MK160	MK8.89
Phalombe				MK15.00 – MK20.00
Nsanje	Cup	.250	MK10	MK40.00
	Cup	.424	MK15	MK35.00
Thyolo				MK18.00 – MK25.00
Chiradzulu	50kgs bag	50kgs	MK750	MK15.00
Nkhotakota	Pail	18	MK280	MK15.55
Salima				MK15.00 – MK17.00
Dowa	Pail	20kgs	MK250	– MK12.50 –

Private traders sell their maize in local markets and maize was readily available in the local markets during the assessment period. The maize in the local markets was coming from within and outside the country. In Karonga the maize was coming from within the country from Kasungu and Chitipa districts where maize availability is still favourable. In Kasungu and Mzimba districts, the maize was coming from within the area because of the favourable maize availability situation in these

districts. In Nkhotakota maize was coming from Ntchisi while in Dowa it was from within the district. Some of the maize in the southern region, (in Mangochi, Machinga, Phalombe, and Mulanje, Chikwawa and Nsanje districts) was coming from Mozambique although the inflow has gone down as compared to previous seasons due to low maize prices in Malawi and a maize exportation ban instituted by the Government of Mozambique.

However, maize in the local markets is more expensive than the subsidized ADMARC maize which is fixed at MK10.00 per kg. The prices ranged between MK9.00 and MK25.00 for most of the county, and up to MK40/kg for Nsanje Boma market as shown in Table 4 below. The high prices in Nsanje are due to low supplies locally, partly attributed to the failure of last year's winter crop for reasons already cited in the report. It is the poor farmers who do not have enough money and tend to buy in small quantities who are paying a high price since the smaller the unit of measurement in the market the more expensive the commodity gets.

4.1.2 ADMARC Markets

Maize prices in ADMARC markets remained at the fixed price of MK10.00/kg. However, the supply in these markets was erratic and inadequate. Maize does not last a day whenever it becomes available at the market. The team found groups of people, mainly women, waiting to buy maize in most of the ADMARC markets in the southern region markets but the maize was not available. In some areas, people were moving from one district to another looking for ADMARC maize. This was observed in Thyolo-Masambanjati area and Chiradzulu, where people were coming from Chikwawa and Blantyre-Chileka area, respectively, looking for ADMARC maize.

The situation in Karonga was the same, only that at the time of our visit, maize had just arrived but the queue was long, probably over 60 people. The supply of maize is erratic as such these people keep on coming as they do not know when the next consignment will arrive. Some of the officials in the markets complained of lack of coordination between the source of supply, which is the NFRA, and the ADMARC district markets, as they too do not know when another consignment will come. However the pattern has been one or two deliveries of about 30MT each per week. The situation is different in Kasungu, Lilongwe, Dowa, and Mzimba where the demand for maize is not very high and maize was readily available in the ADMARC markets. The maize at Kasungu ADMARC market has been there since last year. In some markets, like Phalombe, maize was not available for some time despite the increase in the demand pattern.

In most ADMARC markets where the demand is very high maize sales are being rationed to make sure that those queuing for maize are getting something. The rationing varies from one ADMARC maize market to another and it is in the range of 10kg to 25 kg depending on the quantities supplied.

The unreliability of ADMARC maize supplies has had adverse effects on prices, particularly in Nsanje, where traders can raise prices by as much as 100% depending on whether or not ADMARC has maize. The MK10/kg price also affected informal imports from Mozambique since traders from Mozambique found the price to be too low as Malawian traders were offering less than MK10/kg if they were to compete with ADMARC and still make a profit. The result is that private trader stocks are too low to meet the demand during this lean period and, coupled with other factors, driving prices up.

4.2 Sources of Income

The main source of income for majority of the poor households is *ganyu*. *Ganyu* is a very important source of income for the poor households and most of them depend on this to obtain cash to buy food

especially maize. Now that the agricultural activities are at the peak, a number of the poor households are engaged in this activity. Most of the households currently prefer to be paid cash as opposed to food because they can easily find the food on the market (especially in local markets and friends within the village). However, when maize is scarce, people prefer to be paid in food. *Ganyu* is apparently readily available and the only difference with last season is that the agricultural activities that most of the households do their *ganyu* on were delayed due to the late onset of the rains. The availability of *ganyu* therefore has not changed, apart from the slight shift of some activities. From our investigations, the *ganyu* rates did not vary much across districts. The rates range roughly between MK1,000 to MK3,000 per hectare in case of a maize field and MK7,500 per hectare in case of rice. So if one was able to do *ganyu* on one hectare of maize field, he/she would probably be able to purchase about two to six bags of maize at the ADMARC prevailing price of MK10.00/kg and about half of that on the private trader markets where the prices are almost double. However, most households do *ganyu* for less than a hectare per month due to competing demands for their labour as they also have to work on their own fields. In addition, there are many people looking for *ganyu* at this time of the year and a hectare will be shared among a number of people. In general though, there are no significant difference in wage rates between this and last year.

In Mulanje and Thyolo the poor are working in tea estates and they are being paid MK37.50 per day for an agreed number of kilograms. The peak period normally starts in December and ends in May but this year, due to the delays in the onset of rains, erratic rains, and dry spells, the period has started in January, one month late than normally expected.

At this time of the year, crop sales are not a major source of income, especially for the poor households. However, reaping of tobacco is just beginning and some farmers in the tobacco growing areas will begin to obtain cash from tobacco sales to buy food. The income realized from tobacco may be reduced due to stunting of the crop in most areas as a result of the current rainfall pattern.

Sale of livestock is another important source of income, especially when food shortage reaches critical stages. However, at the moment not many households are selling livestock in order to obtain cash to buy food. These livestock include chickens, goats, and cattle. The cattle are mostly owned by the well-off households and are rarely sold. The ones who were selling livestock during the assessment period were selling at normally expected price ranges.

Fish are an important income source, mainly for households along the lake. However, it was pointed out that the people who do the actual fishing are not many and some of them are from outside the locality. Nevertheless, the households in these areas still benefit directly or indirectly through doing fish related *ganyu* (working for fishermen), buying and selling of the fish, etc. The income obtained from these activities is used to buy maize among other things.

Other sources of income included firewood/charcoal sales, fruit sales, and carrying out small business activities.

5.0 Conclusion

There was late onset of the rainfall season this year, especially in the southern region. This was followed by frequent dry spells affecting planting of crops and their development. The situation only improved during second half of the season (January to March). However, the pattern is still not as consistent as unexpected dry spells continue to occur, lasting for about a week or more. The rains have become so unpredictable making it difficult to predict what the harvest outcome this season will be. The rainfall pattern has also disturbed some of the field activities and related income sources.

Despite the unfavourable rainfall pattern, crops are surviving and, in some areas, a favourable harvest is expected if the rains do not end abruptly. However, maize and tobacco production this season are expected to be lower than last year due to the late onset of the rains and frequent dry spells that will affect the yield potential for these crops. Different areas will be affected in different ways due to the variations in the maize and other crops development stages across and within the districts. Cassava, which is drought tolerant, has not been significantly affected with the current rainfall pattern, except for areas where farmers wanted to plant the crop for the first time and experienced frequent and prolonged dry spells to the extent that the cassava cuttings failed to get established when planted due to moisture stress.

There is high demand for maize in ADMARC markets, especially in the southern region and Karonga in the northern region as the number of households running out of food from own production increases. However, some of these people are believed to have been hired by private traders to buy on their behalf as ADMARC maize sales are being rationed in most of the markets. The private traders then sell this maize on the local markets at a higher price.

The short supply of maize in ADMARC markets, coupled with the increase in the number of households running out of food from own production, has resulted in price increases in the local markets to almost double the ADMARC price of MK10.00/kg, making it difficult for poor households to afford adequate quantities.

6.0 Recommendations

The current weather pattern may result in some households facing serious food shortages in the 2004/05 marketing year. There is need therefore to *encourage and support farmers to grow winter crops* through improved access to irrigation equipment, seed and fertilizer. Direct food assistance through programmes such as food-for-work and free food distribution, in extreme cases, might be necessary, depending on the final harvest outcome. At this time though, it is not possible to state definitively whether or not a certain area will require external intervention to avert a crisis simply because the season is not yet over and it is not possible to have an accurate prediction in terms of the performance of the rains up to the end of the season.

There is need to *increase the quantity of maize supplies in ADMARC markets* to meet increased demand. The communication channels between the ADMARC district offices and the authorities responsible for the supply of the maize also need to be improved. Provision of computers at the district ADMARC offices would also go a long way in improving data storage, management and efficient communication in the long run.

Private traders are playing an important role in ensuring that there is maize in the local markets. However, the MK10 price by ADMARC distorted prices in some areas and hindered private trader activity in maize trade, resulting in low private trader stocks during the lean season. As a result, there are huge increases in local market prices in those areas whenever ADMARC runs out of stocks. This was more pronounced in Nsanje and Chikwawa. Due to ADMARC's inability to maintain steady supplies, private traders are buying maize in Mozambique where they are accused of driving prices up. There is therefore *need to improve market efficiency* to ensure that prices are *reasonable and stable*.

In general, most areas have received less rainfall cumulatively than normally expected as the intensity is very low and the distribution pattern is very erratic. As the rainfall pattern is very unpredictable this year, there is *need for continuous monitoring of the crop development* in the field so that troubled spots are identified early enough for appropriate actions to be taken.

There is *need for a detailed analysis of the situation based on the first round crop estimates* when they become available. The information from this rapid assessment will complement that analysis which would include different scenarios.